

## Introduction

### Issue

What is the ontological status of non-present times as compared with that of the present?

There are two possibilities:

- a. They are the same;
- b. They are different.

As informed by human experience, there seems to be a difference as denoted in the Doctrine of Passage (though it is unclear exactly what this difference is). According to the Doctrine of Passage, times and their contents admit of different, continually changing and incompatible properties – future, present, and past, where future and past admit of varying degrees of magnitude. To be clear, future, present, and past are predicates that may by themselves have no ontological significance. At a minimum, presumably, being present entails being real – i.e., existing.<sup>1</sup> Whether being past or future carries a similar or different or any ontological entailment is part of what is at issue, here. Many philosophers have argued that the designations past, present, and future can have no *objective* significance, and sometimes this argument is based on physical theory. Kurt Gödel, for instance, has argued that physical law allows the possibility of a temporally closed space-time, which would in turn imply that

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<sup>1</sup> Though this has been challenged: REFS

## The Reality of Non-Present Times

...for every possible definition of a world time, one could travel into regions of the universe which are passed [sic.] according to that definition. This again shows that to assume an objective lapse of time would lose every justification in these worlds. For, in whatever way one may assume time to be lapsing, there will always exist possible observers to whose experienced lapse of time no objective lapse corresponds... But, if the experience of the lapse of time can exist without an objective lapse of time, no reason can be given why an objective lapse of time should be assumed at all. (Gödel, 561)

So, the question is, given that the present time and its contents are real, what can we say about the reality of non-present times, past or future? If the statement, 'This present moment is real' is true, what can we say about the statement, 'Non-present moment  $t$  is real'?

I think that the answer depends on what 'real' means – or, to shift terms but not, I think, meanings, it depends on what it means to be or to exist.

I am going to argue that our concept of being is informed entirely by our understanding of the process of becoming – i.e., by temporal passage – and that consequently discussion of time in any terms but these is discussion that we do not in fact understand. In order to make this argument, I will first appeal to remarks made by Descartes that seem to suggest that to be is to continue to be. This view, I believe, involves an appeal to our subjective experience of time as passing. I will then turn to a discussion of our concept of being, appealing first to the views of Peter van Inwagen, and then to those of Kant.

## Descartes

On a previous occasion, I argued that our concept of being is informed by what I called our concept of becoming. The concept of becoming, I said, is itself informed by the above notion of passage. That is, I argued that what ‘being’ (and its cognates and their synonyms) means to us is something found in the human, subjective experience of time, which appears to involve an on-going dynamic, a process or flow of future to present to past. I appealed to Descartes, for example, who writes that

... a *conceptual distinction* is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible... Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question... For example, since a substance cannot cease to endure without also ceasing to be, the distinction between the substance and its duration is merely a conceptual one. (*Principles* I.62; p. 214; Descartes’s emphasis)

I thought then, as I think now, that Descartes is here appealing to the nature of the subjective experience of being in time – that he is saying that we conceive of being as we experience it. For us, to be is to continue to be, where this entails that no thing could be for but an instant. Why not? Because we cannot imagine such a state. That is, for us, since we can understand being only insofar as ours is an experience of it, and since it appears that we could not have a single, instantaneous experience of being – an experience without any passage of time – therefore, there can be no such thing as a being of zero duration.

Now, I am still inclined to think that Descartes is right about this, but it remains to say more clearly why and wherefore, and it remains further to say what this means for the reality of non-present times. So, in order to proceed in that direction, I want to talk about being in general, and to do this I will introduce some remarks made by Peter van Inwagen, followed by some claims made by Kant. As previously, I retain some concerns about the notion of being that is employed in eternalist quarters, and I hope to draw closer to a resolution of these concerns in what follows.

## II

### van Inwagen

According to one mainstream, contemporary tradition, our concept of existence is “univocal”, so that whatever may be said to exist – the present, non-present times and their contents, abstract objects, etc. – exists in one and only one sense. Peter van Inwagen argues for this view in a paper defending what he calls Quine’s “meta-ontology”, which he boils down to several claims, including these:

1. Being is not an activity.
2. Being is the same as existence.
3. Being is univocal.
4. The single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic.

In arguing for these claims, van Inwagen cites Austin to this effect: “‘The word [exist] is a verb, but it does not describe something that things do all the time, like breathing, only quieter – ticking over, as it were, in a metaphysical sort of way,’” (233)<sup>2</sup> and goes on to reject Sartre’s distinction between *être pour-soi* and *être en-soi* – the “being activities” of conscious and non-conscious things, respectively (234). As he denies that things exist in varying *ways*, van Inwagen asserts that we may instead distinguish the *nature* of one thing, as against that of another, so that while a person and a table *exist* in the same sense, they have differing natures. (234-5) Van Inwagen’s argument here is as follows. First, he acknowledges that he (as a person) does participate in a “most general” activity, which he identifies as “lasting or enduring,” and which activity he shares with all other occupants of the physical world. Van Inwagen pursues his point by asserting a difference between the concept of being (existing, etc.), on the one hand, and that of enduring or lasting, on the other. The concept of enduring does have a close conceptual relationship with that of being, he recognizes. But, he points out, so do other concepts, such as color, shape, intelligence, and so on. That is, while we can recognize close relationships between these concepts and the concept of being – in particular, while arguably none of the former can be applied without the latter’s being applied, too – such conceptual closeness does not entail the identity of the closely related concepts. “[E]nduring is no *more* intimately connected with being than are color or shape or intelligence or the ability to ride a bicycle, for the plain reason . . . that one idea is not another idea.” (234; his emphasis) Thus, if the meaning of ‘exists’ is distinct from that of these other concepts, and if, moreover, existing, in this sense of the term, is common to the persistence of both

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<sup>2</sup> Austin refers to ‘exist’; van Inwagen, to ‘be’, but nothing will hang on this, if claim #2 is correct, which I accept.

persons and material things, then existing is not an “activity” admitting of distinct kinds. There is only one sense of ‘being’, the one that applies to a multitude of things of different natures. (I will follow van Inwagen in using the terms ‘being’ and ‘existing’ interchangeable – I accept his claim #2.)

Sartre might reply here that the enduring activity that van Inwagen claims to share with physical objects is, in fact, quite different, in our understanding, from that of the physical object. The difference, he would maintain, consists in enduring as an experienced, subjective phenomenon of time’s event-laden passing versus enduring as the continued location in an objective temporal dimension of a space-occupying material body. That is, where Sartre seeks to preserve a distinction between human phenomenal “activity” as against the persistence of bodies in space-time, van Inwagen appears to characterize all physical being, including that of persons, in the latter terms.

It is this, objective sense of being, in particular, that appears to satisfy van Inwagen’s claim #4. For this sense of being allows what Descartes denies that we can allow. The resources afforded by formal logic enable us to describe a world in which one thing exists for a single instant. Such a world might be rendered thus:

$$\exists t \exists x \mid t \text{ is an instant of time and } x \text{ exists at } t \ \& \ \forall y \mid y = t \vee y = x$$

It may well be that we cannot envision such a brief world, but that appears to be no obstacle to the possible truth of such a formulation, on van Inwagen’s understanding of what ‘being’ means.

## Kant

Previously, I cited Descartes's observation that the existence of a substance cannot be conceived independently of its enduring. Here we find precisely the "intimate connection" between concepts cited by van Inwagen. Van Inwagen calls attention to this connection only to distinguish the meaning of 'exists' from the meanings of 'endures', 'is colored', etc. And clearly it is also Descartes's intention to preserve a distinction between 'substance' on the one hand and 'endurance' on the other, since it is precisely a *conceptual distinction* and not *identity* that he exemplifies with this concept pair.

Nevertheless, we can raise the question just what content our concept of existence has, and it is well-known that its having content is a controversial matter. Kant denied that existence was a real predicate, by which he meant that it had no empirical significance or "validity": there is no distinction between the empirical content of the expression '100 thalers' and '100 existing thalers'. On the other hand, existence certainly has transcendental significance, for Kant: the transcendental significance of a judgment is precisely the representation of some existing, empirical state. Kant cautions us, however, that we are prone to confusing the transcendental with the merely logical. This is because reason is simply a faculty for the manipulation of logical forms, and it manipulates them regardless of their empirical validity. In certain circumstances, failure to distinguish the logical from transcendental significance of a judgment will lead to antinomy – an error of reason.

One conclusion that we might draw here, if we follow Kant, is that our concept of existence has application to an object only where human experience of that object is

possible. This would seem to imply that van Inwagen's understanding of existence is too broad, or that limits must be placed on use of the existential quantifier.

Looking more closely, we find in Kant the notion that reality is for us always constrained by the possibility of experience, where experience involves a synthesis of the conceptual with intuition. Since intuition is for us primarily temporal, whatever we judge a possible reality must conform, for Kant, to the possibility of human temporal intuition, or inner sense. Insofar as a conceptual representation of a possibility conforms to the evident structure of inner sense, such a representation may depict a possible reality. This is why an instantaneous world is for Kant not simply an empirical impossibility, but an unintelligible thought – a thought without content, no thought at all, strictly speaking. The intelligible – that which can be understood – is precisely a matter of a possible match between concept and the intuitive manifold. And since the intuitive manifold appears necessarily to be progressive, a concept lacking that general structure cannot be understood by us.

What does this mean for the reality of non-present times? I think that we may draw two conclusions, if we accept Kant's strictures on human understanding. First, if we are to speak meaningfully of non-present times, we must speak of them as we understand our own present experience. That is, if our experience of time involves a progression such as that characterized in the doctrine of passage, then in speaking of non-present times, we must mean that they, too, have this progressive, evolving, dynamical structure, the structure encapsulated in the concept of becoming. Second, to the extent that our talk of non-present times does not reflect this structure, we must acknowledge that we are now speaking in purely formal terms that we literally cannot understand. Reason gives us the

capacity to talk in this way. And one is tempted to say that there may exist structures so described, such as the world described in Gödel's terms. But if this account of understanding is correct, such structures literally cannot be thought to exist if, as per Gödel, they are incompatible with an experience of becoming. Likewise, it seems to follow that where the geometries of space-time are described in Riemannian or other terms besides the Euclidean, we must confess that we do not understand ourselves.

... we cannot ... originally excogitate a single object in terms of a characteristic that is new and that cannot be indicated empirically, and lay it at the basis of a permitted hypothesis; for that would mean to lay at reason's basis empty chimeras instead of concepts of things. Thus we are not permitted to think up some new original powers, e.g., an understanding capable of intuiting its object without senses; or a force of expansion without any contact or a new kind of substances, e.g., a kind that would be present in space without having impenetrability. Nor, consequently, may we think up any community of substances that is different from all such community provided to us by experience, nor think up any presence otherwise than as presence in space, or any duration except only as duration in time. In a word: our reason can use as condition of the possibility of things only the conditions of possible experience; by no means can it, entirely independently of these, create for itself – as it were – such conditions of the possibility of things. For such concepts, although being without contradiction, would nonetheless also be without an object.” (A770/B798-A771/B799)

I recognize that this appears to be a highly skeptical conclusion, and one that appears to fly in the face of a body of highly successful physical theory, to say nothing of abstract objects, etc. My intention, however, is not to deny the success of modern science, but only to turn the tables on arguments from related quarters that seek to impugn the reality of the human world. If Kant's account of understanding is correct, then insofar as our talk of time is intelligible, it must reflect the dynamic of becoming. To the extent that it does not, I believe that we do not understand it.

## The Reality of Non-Present Times

Should we accept Kant's strictures on human understanding? ... What is an apple? ...

The more I teach, the more I try to explain to my students what a concept is or what God might be, how to be clear, how themselves to explain an idea, the more I find myself relying on Kant's account of understanding as involving a "match" between conceptual and intuitive representation. ...

Insofar as 'real' expresses a possible cognition, I can understand it. Insofar as it does not, I cannot.

I am appealing to a specifically Kantian notion of understanding. ...

If we follow Kant further, we find that to exist (in conceptual terms) is to have empirical presence, which, for Kant, implies temporality. The concept of time, for Kant, is of course informed by the second category of relation, namely, causation. The logical form of causation is the conditional – what Kant calls succession according to a rule. But succession according to a rule is a general construct, capable in principle of taking on different forms. While humans may employ a schematized version of this construct to understand their intuition of time, reason clearly could apply the construct in another context, were there any in which to do so.

Kant provides three different forms in which to consider succession according to a rule. In terms of mere logic, we have the conditional structure, if ... then .... At the level of the categories, we have causation, cause and effect. But to be more precise, the pure causal concept is non-committal with respect to time. A more general expression of the second category of relation might be “ground and consequent”, where this expression does not imply a succession in time. The temporal application of this category is the result of schematism: temporal ground followed by consequent according to a rule – i.e., causality as experienced in time by humans. That the more general notion may be otherwise applied than in time is suggested by our capacity to conceive God’s creative relationship to the world as an atemporal one. This idea of an hypostasis may be found in the thought of Spinoza, for example, and is expressly studied and elaborated by the Neo-Platonists.

## Introduction

**Issue:** What is the ontological status of non-present times as compared with that of the present – and in particular, as informed by human experience of the present?

**Descartes:** Descartes seems to assert that we cannot understand being outside of the context of “becoming” – i.e., outside of the context of the subjective experience of temporal passage.

## II

**van Inwagen:** Van Inwagen argues that there is only one sense of ‘being’ (‘exists’, etc.), and appears to think that being has a meaning independent of becoming.

**Kant:** Kant asserts that concepts have empirical validity only insofar as they can have application to the sensory manifold; independent of this setting, concepts have only formal qualities, meaning that they lack ontological significance; this point goes double for ‘being’, since Kant argues independently that ‘being’ has no specific empirical content.

**Thesis:** If Kant is right, and as Descartes seems to suggest, the subjective experience of being (i.e., becoming) exhausts the meaning of ‘being’, which would imply that we cannot understand reference to non-present times.

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